

The urban entering Flanders' rural areas

A comparative study of underlying dynamics and spatial effects

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Keywords

urbanization, rural areas, countryside, open space, sprawl, transformations, underlying dynamics, driving forces, attractors

Abstract

Due to urbanization, Flanders, the northern part of Belgium, is one of the most densely built and inhabited regions in Europe. Within this urban sprawl area, the countryside has evolved from a monofunctional open agricultural production area to a complex spatial structure consisting of open space fragments with different densities and functions such as housing, work and recreation.

The article studies five morphological and functional transformations related to the urbanization process in Flanders' open space: (a) the evolution of the built-up density and the sprawl pattern, (b) the residential use of open space, with an increasing population density, (c) the economic diversification, converting rural areas from an agriculturally based economy to a much more diverse economic base, (d) the increasing private use of rural areas as an extension of the home environment for gardens and hobby farming, and (e) the growing use of open space as public space, making it more accessible particularly because of the success of recreational networks.

Based on a literature review, the driving forces behind these transformations are studied, while the spatially differentiated attractors are assessed through an extensive case study in nine municipalities. The spatial concurrence and interaction of these five phenomena is examined. It seems that privatization and public use are strongly interrelated, while the municipalities with a high built-up density and population show most urbanization phenomena, indicating the interrelation between these five transformations. This can to a certain extent be explained by common drivers and attractors.

By researching these underlying dynamics of the urbanization process and not merely its spatial effects, opportunities for policy to intervene proactively are created, but also the possibility to extrapolate the case study findings to the scale of Flanders using indicators is tested.

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